The Negro American: His Self-Image and Integration*

ALVIN F. POUSSAINT, M.D.

Southern Field Director, Medical Committee for Human Rights, Jackson, Mississippi
and
Senior Clinical Instructor in Psychiatry, Tufts University Medical College, Boston, Massachusetts

MOST psychiatrists and psychologists would agree that the Negro American suffers from a marred self-image, of varying degree, which critically affects his entire psychological being. It is also a well-documented fact that this negative self-concept leads to self-destructive attitudes and behavior that hinder the Negro's struggle toward full equality in American life.[1] Civil rights leaders have long been aware of the need to build a positive sense of identity in the Negro masses. Today, however, there are widening schisms among these leaders as to how this can best be accomplished.

For the past decades civil rights groups have vigorously pursued the ideal that the integration of Negroes into "all phases of American life" combined with the teaching of a bit of "Negro History" would solve most of the Negro's identity problems. Exceptions have been the Black Muslims and other nationalist groups who have insisted upon separation of the races as the ultimate solution to the racial problem. In recent years, however, some of these same civil rights groups have begun to lose faith in the virtues of integration. A few militants have described integration as "a subterfuge for white supremacy," i.e., as always involving only a token number of Negroes integrated into "white institutions on the white man's terms." They believe that integration as presently conceived and practiced in America will lead eventually to a greater crisis in identity for the mass of American Negroes, especially the poor, unless there are counter-measures. Therefore, some have advocated "black consciousness" and different forms of racial solidarity as the way to the Negro's eventual psychological salvation and dignity.

Before we attempt to explore in detail some of the above ideas and approaches, it is necessary to review briefly the historical factors that have led to the Negro's chronic identity crisis.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To understand the Negro's self-image, self-concept, and "Who am I?" problems we must go back to the time of the birth and creation of the "American Negro." Over 300 years ago black men, women, and children were extracted from their native Africa, stripped bare both psychologically and physically, and placed in an alien white land. They were to occupy the most degraded of human conditions: that of a slave, a piece of property, a non-person. For inhumane economic reasons, the Negro family was broken up and scattered from auction block to auction block all over America. The Negro male was completely emasculated, and the Negro woman systematically exploited and vilely degraded. The plantation system implanted a subservience and dependency in the psyche of the Negro that made him forever dependent upon the good will and paternalism of the white man.

By 1863, when slavery was abolished, the Negro had been stripped of his culture and left with this heritage: an oppressed black man in a hostile white man's world. In the late 1800's and early 1900's the systematized racist and sometimes psychotic propaganda of the white man, haranguing about the inferiority of the Negro, increased in intensity. He was disenfranchised, terrorized, mutilated and lynched. The Negro became every unacceptable, pernicious idea and impulse that the white man's psyche wished to project, i.e., the black man was animal with a violence to murder, ravaging sexual impulses, etc. The intensity of the white man's psychological need that the Negro be shaped in the image of this projected mental sickness was such as to inspire the whole system of organized discrimination, segregation and exclusion of Negroes from society.

In the resulting color caste system, white people made certain that any wares they allotted to the Negro were inferior. The Caucasian American

socialized the black man to internalize and believe all of the many vile things he said about him. They encouraged and rewarded behavior and attitudes in Negroes that substantiated their indicting stereotypes. Black men were happy go-lucky, lazy, stupid, irresponsible, etc. Our mass media disseminated these images with vigor on radio, in movies, etc., and like unrelenting electric shocks conditioned the mind of the Negro to say, "Yes, I am inferior."

Not only have black men been taught that blackness is evil and Negroes "no-good," they have, in addition, been continually brain-washed that only "white is right." It was the light-skinned Negroes with straight hair who were allowed to elevate themselves in America. Of course, the white people suggested, and Negroes came to believe, that such Negroes were better because they had much "white blood." And there are still cliques of light-skinned Negroes in our communities who reject their darker brothers. Black men were taught to despise their kinky hair, broad nose, and thick lips. Our "black" magazines pushed the straightening of hair and bleaching cream as major weapons in the Negro's fight for social acceptability and psychological comfort.

CURRENT SITUATION

The most tragic, yet predictable, part of all this is that the Negro has come to form his self-image and self-concept on the basis of what white racists have prescribed. Therefore, black men and women learn quickly to hate themselves and each other because they are Negroes. And, paradoxically, some black men tend to distrust and hate each other more than their white oppressor.[1,2] There is abundant evidence that racism has left almost irreparable scars on the psyche of Afro-Americans that burden them with an unrelenting, painful anxiety that drives the psyche to reach out for a sense of identity and self-esteem.[1,2,3]

Although the Negro's self-concept is determined in part by factors associated with poverty and low-economic class status, being a Negro has many implications for the ego development of black people that are not inherent in lower-class membership. The black child develops in a color caste system and inevitably acquires the negative self-esteem that is the natural outcome of membership in the lowest stratum of such a system. Through contacts with institutionalized symbols of caste inferiority

such as segregated schools, neighborhoods, etc., and more indirect negative indicators such as the reactions of his own family, he gradually becomes aware of the social and psychological implications of racial membership. He may see himself as an object of scorn and disparagement, unwanted by the white high caste society, and as a being unworthy of love and affection. Since there are few counterforces to this negative evaluation of himself, he develops conscious or unconscious feelings of inferiority, self-doubt, and self-hatred.

From that point in early life when the Negro child learns self-hatred, it molds and shapes his entire personality and interaction with his environment. In the earliest drawings, stories, and dreams of Negro children there appear many wishes to be white and a rejection of their own color. They usually prefer white dolls and white friends, frequently identify themselves as white, and show a reluctance to admit that they are Negro.[1,2,3] Studies have shown that Negro youngsters assign less desirable roles and human traits to Negro dolls.[2,3] One study reported that Negro children in their drawings tend to show Negroes as small, incomplete people and whites as strong and powerful.[4]

In Mississippi or any northern city ghetto, one has only to visit Head Start schools with three to five year olds to see that these children already suffer damaged self-esteem. You hear the children shouting at each other in anger, "Black pig," "Dirty nigger," etc. Much of this negative self-image is passed to them directly by parents who themselves have been conditioned by racism to hate their blackness. And thus, a vicious circle is perpetuated from generation to generation.

Sometimes this self-hatred can be quite subtle. Some black people may retreat into their own world and actually be more afraid of success than they are of failure because too often failure has come to be what they know and expect. It is all too frequent that Negroes with ability, intelligence and talent do not aspire to higher levels because they fear the responsibility that will be needed to handle success. Many Afro-Americans tend to have lower aspirations and shy away from competition, particularly with white people. One study showed that even when Negroes were given objective evidence of their equal intellectual ability in an interracial situation they typically continued to feel inadequate and react submissively.[5]

The Negro community's high rate of crimes of violence, illegitimacy, and broken homes can be traced in part to the Negro's learned self-hatred as well as to poverty. Black crime rates are particularly elevated for crimes involving aggression, such as assault and homicide, and these acts are usually committed against other Negroes, and for escapist deviations such as gambling, drug addiction and alcoholism.[2] Many Negroes are caught up in a vicious circle of self-destructive behavior as if to say to the world, "Yes, I am inferior and I hate myself for it."

DISCUSSION

Many of the civil rights gains in the past decade and especially in the 1960's have done, one can surmise, a great deal to modify the negative self-concept of the Negro. The civil rights movement itself has brought a new sense of dignity and respect to those blacks most severely deprived by poverty and oppression in the rural south and northern ghetto. One factor that may have been important in the movement that helped to improve the self-image of the masses of Negroes was that black men were leading the struggle, and not white men. This fact in itself probably made Negroes, through the process of identification, take a pride in their group and feel less helpless knowing that they could bring about positive change in their environment. The feeling that one can have "control" over social forces is crucial to one's feelings of ego-strength and self-esteem. Thus, the movement brought to the Negro a new sense of power in a country dominated by a resistant white majority. Beyond this achievement, however, civil rights leaders tended to see total integration of the black and white races as the final step in destroying the Negro's negative self-image.

In stark contrast to this position, and not without a salutary influence on the Negro's self-image, was that of the Black Muslims. This was the one major Negro group that called for separation of the races and black supremacy as an alternative approach to the black man's problems of identity and self-esteem. Observers generally agree that the Muslims were quite effective in rehabilitating many anti-social and criminal types by fostering in them a positive self-image and pride in their blackness.[6,7] The significant fact is that the Muslims were able to alleviate much of the individual Negro's self-hatred without holding up

or espousing integration or "full acceptance" of the black man into American white society.

Now we see slowly emerging in segments of the civil rights movement a disenchantment with the social and psychological consequences of integration. This disenchantment is due at least in part to the fact that integration has moved at a snail's pace and has been marked by white resistance and tokenism. The Negro has found himself in the uncomfortable position of asking and demanding the white man to let him in his schools, restaurants, theatres, etc., even though he knew the white man did not want him. In the south and north, many Afro-Americans resented the indignity of being in the eternal position of "begging for acceptance" into the white man's institutions. And it was further demoralizing to the mass of Negroes that the recent civil rights laws did not effectively change this pattern. It became apparent that integration was not to be integration in a real sense at all, particularly in the schools. Negro parents in the south never speak of sending their children to the "integrated school"; they say, "My child is going to the *white* school." No white children are "integrated" into Negro schools. Since integration is only a one-way street that Negroes travel to a white institution, then inherent in the situation itself is the implied inferiority of the black man.

Parents who fear psychological harm to their children are not anxious to send them to "integrated" schools. Some of the college aged young people in the movement state frankly that they find this type of integration personally degrading and do not want to go to any school where they have to be "accepted by southern white racists."

Since the Negro numbers at any white school are token, particular hardships are created for him because he is placed in a school with children who are generally the products of white racists' homes. The black child must withstand abundant psychological abuse in this situation as well as be an "experimental laboratory" for bigoted whites "to learn to live with Nigras." Since all children want to belong, the Negro must become an expert at "being liked and accepted." If such a child's self-esteem grows in such a situation it is not from a greater comfortness in being Negro but more likely because of his own conditioned belief that "white is right," or because he is successfully being a true martyr or pioneer.

Assimilation by definition always takes place according to the larger societal (white) model of culture and behavior, and thus the Negro must give up much of his black identity and subculture to be comfortably integrated. Many Negroes who seek complete assimilation become preoccupied with "proving" themselves to white people and trying to show them that "we are just like all other human beings," that is, that they are really *not* Negro.

Many Afro-Americans expend a great deal of internal energy trying to seek "individual freedom" in a white man's world. But it is a vain effort because "personal acceptability" has to be repeatedly proven to each new white group. The Negro group's vigorous pursuit of middle-class status symbols is frequently an overdetermined attempt to demonstrate to the white man, as well as to themselves, that they can be successful, worthwhile human beings. White America, however, has lumped all Negroes together in one collective image and hence, for no Negro can there be "individual freedom" unless there is "group freedom," which means undoing racial self-hatred. The Negro too often aspires to and gets entangled in the perverse situation where he feels that the most flattering compliment his white friends can pay him is: "You don't act like all the other Negroes," or "You don't seem Negro to me."

Many Negroes, including segments of the civil rights movement and nationalists, are beginning to fear that this type of "token integration" may augment the identity problems of the Negro. Little has been done to study the changes in self-concept of Negro children who attend "desegregated" schools in the south. Clearly, much more research has to be done in this field. But we do know that such integration as has existed in the north has not substantially helped to solve the Negro's identity problems.[3] In any event, there is a growing sense of racial solidarity and pride in Negroes both in the north and south. Afro-Americans are beginning to feel that it is through their strength as a group that they will win human dignity and power.

"Black consciousness," including the call for "black power," movement supporters argue that as long as Negroes are powerless politically and do not have their own sense of pride and worth as black men, they are psychological beggars in a white man's house. As has been pointed out, there are many negative implications of "token integration" for the Negro. On the other hand, would all-black insitutions provide Negroes with a more stable, positive sense of identity and self-esteem?

It is known that such groups as the Black Muslims have frequently had many positive and constructive effects on the black community.[6,7] This group has brought greater self-reliance and dignity to the Negro community. They have also instilled pride and esteem in Negroes by emphasizing Negro history and achievements. "Black consciousness" programs can build Negro self-confidence by calling upon the black man to think and do for himself. They may also provide the stimulus for more independent thought and grass-roots problem-solving and the development of community leadership. Such programs seem to have the potential for undoing much of the Negro's learned self-hatred that leads to self-destructive behavior. Finally, such groups could constructively channel Negro frustrations and anger that leads to destructive violence and riots.

The question must be raised, however, whether such "all black" programs will in some way lead to more identity and self-esteem problems for the Negro since such groups would always exist within the pervading dominant white culture. There is some chance for such negative effects to develop, but if Negroes are truly *equals* in the larger society, a black subculture could exist much in the same way that America has subcultures of other national and racial groups such as the Jews, Irish, Chinese, etc. It is also clear that despite the drive for racial integration this is being vigorously resisted by the white population and we can expect to have isolated, predominantly black communities for a long time to come.

Since the Negro's self-concept problems cannot be solved through token integration, it is important that black men turn to the development of their own communities as an alternative and supplementary approach for building the Afro-American's self-image and -esteem. Unfortunately, the white man cannot give Negroes "black consciousness," Negro Americans must give it to each other. This means that black people must undo the centuries of brain-washing by the white man, and substitute in its stead a positive self-image and positive concepts of oneself—and that self happens to be the black, dispossessed, disenchanted, and particularly poverty-stricken Negro.

SUMMARY

The Negro suffers from many problems of identity and negative self-image because of the racism, discrimination, and segregation in American life. The civil rights movement has generated some changes, but integration as presently practiced does not seem to offer the mass of Negroes a solution to problems of negative self-concept. It has been suggested in this paper that token integration into "white institutions" may lead to greater identity crises for Afro-Americans. "Black consciousness" movements appear to be able to contribute a great deal to the Negroes' sense of identity and self-esteem, and could mobilize the black community for positive political and social action. The development of "black consciousness" could serve as an alternative and supplementary approach to the building of the Negroes' self-image along with the present drive toward complete racial integration.

LITERATURE CITED

1. KVARACEUS, W. C. et al. Negro Self-Concept: Implications for School and Citizenship. McGraw-Hill, Inc., New York, 1965.

2. PETTIGREW, T. F. A Profile of the Negro American. D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., Princeton, 1964.

3. GROSSACK, M. M. Mental Health and Segregation. Springer Publishing Co., Inc., New York, 1965.

4. COLES, R. "When I Draw the Lord He'll be a Real Big Man," The Atlantic, May, 1966, p. 69.

5. KATZ, I. and L. BENJAMIN. Effects of White Authoritarianism in Biracial Work Groups. J. Abnormal and Soc. Psych., 61:448, 1960.

6. LINCOLN, C. E. The Black Muslims in America. Beacon Press, Boston, 1961.

7. HALEY, A. The Autobiography of Malcolm X. Grove Press, New York, 1964.

———•———

(Contents, concluded)